



# Modulating the photooxidation selectivity on graphitic carbon nitride by tuning edge functional groups

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## ABSTRACT

Selective photooxidation reactions offer a promising route for transformation of organic pollutants into high-value products under mild conditions. In this work, we demonstrate that the edge functional groups in polymeric carbon nitride (PCN) were key to the selectivity of methyl mercaptan (CH<sub>3</sub>SH) photocatalytic oxidation. The amino-decorated PCN favors the oxidation of the -SH group of CH<sub>3</sub>SH to forming CH<sub>3</sub>SO<sub>3</sub>H with selectivity up to 84.0%, while cyanamide-enriched PCN prefers to breaking the -CH<sub>3</sub> end of CH<sub>3</sub>SH and produce H<sub>2</sub>SO<sub>4</sub> with selectivity of 82.0%. The totally difference in reaction sites is ascribed to the functional-group-modulated electronic structure of PCN, which determines activity of photoinduced carriers and the molecular oxygen activation pathway. The amino- and cyanamide-decorated PCN leads to preferential generation of <sup>1</sup>O<sub>2</sub> and -O<sub>2</sub>, respectively. This study highlights the significant role of edge groups engineering in modulation of the excitonic effects in PCN and the resultant selectivity control during photocatalytic reaction.

## 1. Introduction

Semiconductor-based photocatalytic solar-energy conversion technology, as an environmentally benign method, has been widely studied in the oxidation of volatile organic compounds [1,2]. Among various semiconductor photocatalysts, polymeric carbon nitride (PCN) has attracted tremendous attention as an emerging and promising metal-free photocatalyst with distinctive merits including facile synthesis, abundant availability, tunable structure, visible light absorption and robust chemical stability [3,4]. At present, most studies on PCN are centered at the development of new PCN materials to realize high photocatalytic efficiency. However, there are lack of strategies to control the reaction pathway to produce desirable products with high selectivity. Actually, only a few studies were reported to control the selectivity of photocatalytic reaction over PCN by varying external parameters or modifying with transition metal. For instance, the excitation wavelength was found to be able to tune the enantioselectivity of ethylbenzene oxidation to phenylethanol or the selective syntheses of a series of azo- and azoxy-aromatic compounds from nitroaromatics [5,6]. The coordination

environments of Cu incorporated in PCN was also found to change the products (CH<sub>3</sub>OH or CO) of CO<sub>2</sub> reduction [7].

It is well-established that PCN materials exhibit a high density of defect sites, which is able to be functionalized. Theoretical and experimental evidence have demonstrated that edge-selective functionalization enables the regulation of various properties in PCN, such as photon absorption and electronic properties [8,9]. Accordingly, engineering the edge functional groups in PCN has been used to improve the photocatalytic efficiency for the evolution of H<sub>2</sub> and pollutants removal in previous studies [10–12]. These intriguing features in PCN by altering the dangling edge functional groups also provide a promising opportunity to modulate chemoselectivity of the photocatalytic reaction. However, photocatalytic selective oxidation modulated by edge functionalization is less explored, let alone a mechanistic understanding on how specific structural features in PCN affect selectivity. Such information is crucial for the rational design of functional PCN catalysts to regulate the reaction pathways assuring the final desired products.

Methyl mercaptan (CH<sub>3</sub>SH), widely emitted from industry wastes, sewage/wastewater treatment plants, and sanitary landfill, is one of the

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major causes that lead to the severe environmental malodorous pollution [13–16]. As a typical sulfur-containing volatile compounds, methyl mercaptan has an extremely low odor threshold of 0.4 ppb/v [17]. Besides its high toxicity and pathogenicity, methyl mercaptan is also reported to be involved in the physicochemical and photochemical processes of atmospheric sulfate aerosols [18,19]. Therefore, efficient elimination of  $\text{CH}_3\text{SH}$  pollution is of great significance for health and environment.

Over the past decades, many efforts have been devoted to  $\text{CH}_3\text{SH}$  abatement. Compared with traditional catalytic incineration, chemical scrubbing, and adsorption [20–25], catalytic oxidation technology is considered as a promising approach for  $\text{CH}_3\text{SH}$  removal, because of its less energy expenditure, simple operation, and minimal secondary pollution. During the catalytic oxidation of  $\text{CH}_3\text{SH}$ ,  $\text{CH}_3\text{SO}_3\text{H}$  and  $\text{H}_2\text{SO}_4$  are usually two major products. Both of them are important chemicals that can be used as feedstock or basic building blocks in fine chemical industry and energy storage [26,27]. Thus, it is highly attractive to regulate the  $\text{CH}_3\text{SH}$  oxidation reaction path to produce desired chemicals. In the previous studies, the oxidation of  $\text{CH}_3\text{SH}$  is generally reported to undergo a sequential manner, in which the  $\text{CH}_3\text{SH}$  is first oxidized to  $\text{CH}_3\text{SO}_3\text{H}$ , and subsequently to  $\text{H}_2\text{SO}_4$  [28–31]. As a result, controlling the reaction process to stop at the  $\text{CH}_3\text{SO}_3\text{H}$  is a great challenge. To the best of our knowledge, the reported selectivity for  $\text{CH}_3\text{SO}_3\text{H}$  is less than 40% [28,29]. On the other hand, the complete transformation of  $\text{CH}_3\text{SH}$  to  $\text{H}_2\text{SO}_4$  is also difficult, because of the inertness of  $\text{CH}_3\text{SO}_3\text{H}$ . Only under harsh conditions, such as using strong oxidants ( $\text{O}_3$  or  $\text{H}_2\text{O}_2$ ) and transitional/noble metal-based catalyst, can  $\text{H}_2\text{SO}_4$  yield be increased [28,29,32,33].

The oxidation of  $\text{CH}_3\text{SH}$  can proceed theoretically through two pathways, either breaking the methyl group to directly deliver the  $\text{H}_2\text{SO}_4$  products ( $\text{CH}_3\text{SH} \rightarrow \text{H}_2\text{SO}_4$ ), or oxidizing S site in  $\text{CH}_3\text{SH}$  yielding  $\text{CH}_3\text{SO}_3\text{H}$  ( $\text{CH}_3\text{SH} \rightarrow \text{CH}_3\text{SO}_3\text{H}$ ). Regulation of the reaction pathway would enable the selective formation of  $\text{H}_2\text{SO}_4$  or  $\text{CH}_3\text{SO}_3\text{H}$ . In this study, we show that tuning the edge functional groups of PCN can direct the  $\text{CH}_3\text{SH}$  photooxidation along a desired reaction pathway, at similar polymer backbone and crystallinity of PCN. On amino-decorated PCN, the oxidation of S site is dominant, and the methyl group remains untouched, while the cyanamide-PCN tends to destroy the methyl group. Detailed comparisons in the structure, photoluminescence and formation of active oxygen species between these two photocatalysts were further carried out to provide deep insight into their different photocatalytic behaviors.

## 2. Experimental section

### 2.1. Preparation of photocatalysts

The synthesis of PCN-MT with melamine and trichloroisocyanuric acid refers to the work from Xie et al. [34] and Chen et al. [35] who prepared PCN using melamine-cyanuric chloride and melamine-cyanuric acid, respectively. Typically, melamine and trichloroisocyanuric acid (1:2 molar ratio) were mixed with 150 mL methanol solvent, and magnetically stirred at room temperature for about 12 h to obtain dried powders. The dry precursor was washed several times with methanol and deionized water, and then transferred to a vacuum oven at 60 °C overnight. The resulting powders were placed in a muffle furnace and calcined at 550 °C for 5 h with a ramp rate of 4.8 °C/min. The resultant samples were ground, affording yellow powders of PCN-MT.

PCN-IT was prepared through a modified ionothermal polymerization method according to previous reports [36]. Typically, 0.6 g of the PCN-MT sample was completely ground with KCl (3.3 g) and LiCl (2.7 g). The mixture was placed in a tube furnace and heated to 550 °C for 4 h at a rate of 4.8 °C/min in an argon atmosphere. The yellow green product was washed several times with boiling deionized water and then dried at 60 °C under vacuum.

PCN-NH<sub>2</sub> (Melamine), PCN-NH<sub>2</sub> (Dicyandiamide), PCN-NH<sub>2</sub> (Urea) were prepared by directly heating different precursors (melamine, dicyandiamide and urea) to 550 °C for 5 h with temperature ramping rate of 4.8 °C/min, respectively.

PCN-MT-xCN was synthesized according to previous reports [37]. Typically, 60 mg PCN-MT and 0 mmol, 0.5 mmol and 2 mmol of NaSCN (PCN-MT-0CN, PCN-MT-1CN, PCN-MT-2CN) were mixed with 13 mL acetonitrile in a 20 mL photoreactor, and magnetically stirred under white LED with energy density of 100 mW cm<sup>-2</sup> for 8 h. The resultant product was washed with methanol and deionized water for several times.

### 2.2. Characterization

XRD patterns were collected on an X-ray diffractometer (Empyrean, PANalytical) operating with a Cu K $\alpha$  X-ray source at a scan rate of 2°/min. FTIR spectra were acquired on a Nicolet iS50 FTIR spectrometer in a KBr pellet. The XPS were recorded on a Thermal ESCALAB 250Xi spectrometer with a Mg K $\alpha$  (1253.6 eV) source. All binding energies were corrected with respect to the C 1s peak at 284.8 eV. The UV–vis diffuse reflectance spectra (DRS) of the samples were recorded on a UV–vis spectrophotometer (HITACHI UH-4150). The steady-state photoluminescence spectra, time-resolved photoluminescence spectra as well as the temperature dependent photoluminescence spectra were obtained on a FLS 1000 fluorescence spectrometer with an excitation wavelength of 374 nm. The reactive species on the photocatalysts were detected by a Bruker E500 electron paramagnetic resonance spectroscopy. 2,2,6,6-tetramethyl-4-piperidone (TEMP) and 5,5-Dimethyl-1-pyrroline-N-oxide (DMPO) were taken as spin-trapped reagents to identify <sup>1</sup>O<sub>2</sub> and  $\cdot\text{O}_2^-$ , respectively. The electrochemical measurements were carried out on an Autolab PGSTAT302N electrochemical workstation equipped with a three-electrode system. Specifically, Ag/AgCl electrode, Pt wire and photocatalysts-coated FTO were employed as the reference electrode, the counter electrode, and the working electrode, respectively. The working electrode was prepared by coating a 200  $\mu\text{L}$  slurry with 2 mg catalysts, 16  $\mu\text{L}$  5% Nafion and 184  $\mu\text{L}$  ethanol onto the FTO (2 cm<sup>2</sup>). A xenon lamp (300 W) with AM 1.5 G cutoff filter was utilized as the light source. The electrolyte was a 0.25 M Na<sub>2</sub>SO<sub>4</sub> solution.

### 2.3. Photocatalytic oxidation of CH<sub>3</sub>SH

Photocatalytic oxidation of  $\text{CH}_3\text{SH}$  by PCN was carried out in a continuous flow stainless steel reactor (Beijing CEALight Co., Ltd., SUS304, diameter 106 mm, depth 78 mm) with a cover window of quartz (diameter 52 mm) at room temperature (25 °C) and atmospheric pressure. A 300 W xenon lamp (AM 1.5 G cutoff filter, light intensity 250 mW cm<sup>-2</sup>) as the light source was placed vertically on the top of the reactor. Photocatalysts were immobilized on quartz microfiber films (diameter, 5.2 cm) before the experiment. Typically, 50 mg PCN was ultrasonically dispersed in 8 mL methanol. Then the mixture was deposited onto the quartz microfiber films by drop-casting and dried in fume cupboard overnight. The inlet  $\text{CH}_3\text{SH}$  with an initial concentration of 50 ppm was prepared by diluting 500 ppm  $\text{CH}_3\text{SH}$  with synthetic air in a gas mixing chamber under dry conditions. The total flow rate was controlled at 50 mL min<sup>-1</sup> using mass flow controllers. Before the reaction, 50 ppm  $\text{CH}_3\text{SH}$  was passed through the PCN catalysts in the dark for 30 min to reach adsorption–desorption equilibrium. The concentration of  $\text{CH}_3\text{SH}$  and oxidation products in the reactor effluent were monitored by a  $\text{CH}_3\text{SH}$  sensor, ion chromatography (IC), proton transfer reaction time-of-flight mass spectrometer (PTR-TOFMS).

### 2.4. Calculation details

DFT calculations were implemented within the Vienna Ab-initio Simulation Package [38–41] (VASP) at the generalized gradient

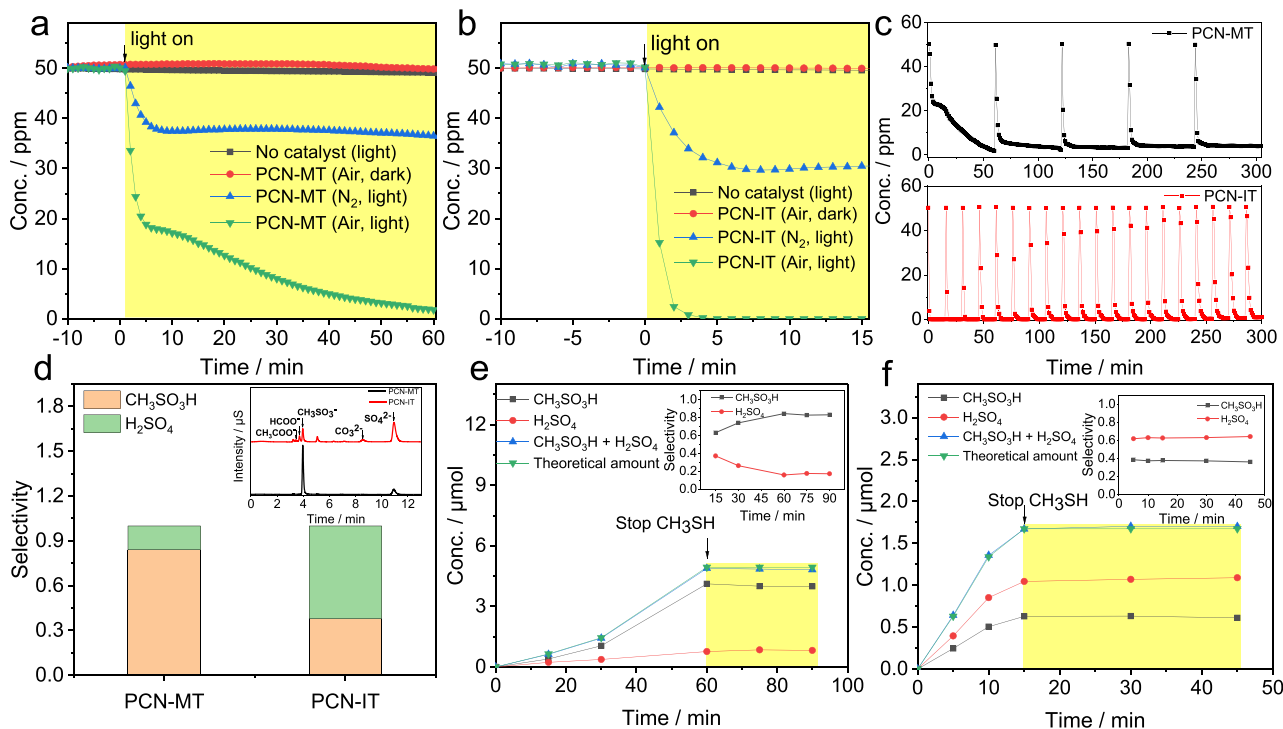
approximation (GGA) scheme with the PBE exchange-correlation functional [42]. Projector augmented wave (PAW) method [43,44] was selected to model the ion-electron interaction. An energy cutoff of 500 eV was used for the plane-wave basis set expansion, and the Gaussian smearing method was applied, with the  $\sigma$  value chosen to be 0.1 eV. Structures were relaxed until the maximum force on the atoms was smaller than 0.03 eV/Å, and the total energy convergence criterion was set to be  $10^{-5}$  eV for all structure optimizations. During structure optimizations, only Gamma point was sampled. Besides, during single-point calculations for density of states (DOS), a  $3 \times 3 \times 1$  Gamma-centered Monkhorst-Pack k points were included for the sampling of Brillouin zone.

### 3. Results and discussion

We first compared the photocatalytic oxidation of  $\text{CH}_3\text{SH}$  on PCN-MT, which was prepared thermally from Melamine and Trichloroisocyanuric acid, and on PCN-IT, fabricated through IonoThermal polymerization of PCN-MT in KCl/LiCl eutectics. For both photocatalysts, a rapid decrease of  $\text{CH}_3\text{SH}$  concentration is observed upon irradiation in the air atmosphere (Fig. 1a, b). Control experiments show that the reaction cannot proceed without photocatalysts, underlining the important role of PCN catalysts in catalyzing the  $\text{CH}_3\text{SH}$  transformations. These PCN-based catalysts are found to be inactive without light, excluding the possibility of thermocatalytic reaction between  $\text{CH}_3\text{SH}$  and  $\text{O}_2$ . Additionally,  $\text{CH}_3\text{SH}$  oxidation is demonstrated to be highly oxygen-dependent. Under  $\text{N}_2$ , the decay of  $\text{CH}_3\text{SH}$  becomes to a much less extent on both photocatalysts, suggesting that the activation of oxygen molecules plays a significant role in  $\text{CH}_3\text{SH}$  oxidation. Experiments for catalysts stability show that there is no obvious decrease in  $\text{CH}_3\text{SH}$  degradation efficiency (Fig. 1c) after 300 min recycling tests. Moreover, XRD and FTIR characterizations of the PCN-MT and PCN-IT before and after the 300 min recycling experiment show that both the crystal structure and the functionalities of photocatalysts is not change much (Fig. S1), demonstrating the excellent stability of these

photocatalysts.

The product analysis by ion chromatography (IC) shows that, on both photocatalysts, the  $\text{CH}_3\text{SO}_3\text{H}$  and  $\text{H}_2\text{SO}_4$  are two main products of the  $\text{CH}_3\text{SH}$  oxidation in the air. The most intriguing difference between the two photocatalysts is their selectivity in  $\text{CH}_3\text{SO}_3\text{H}$  and  $\text{H}_2\text{SO}_4$ . On PCN-MT, the dominant product for  $\text{CH}_3\text{SH}$  oxidation is  $\text{CH}_3\text{SO}_3\text{H}$ , with a selectivity of 84.0%. Negligible carbon-containing products are detected on PCN-MT. By contrast, on the PCN-IT,  $\text{H}_2\text{SO}_4$  becomes superior (62.1%). In addition, carbon-containing products including considerable amounts of formic acid ( $\text{HCOOH}$ ), carbonic acid ( $\text{H}_2\text{CO}_3$ ) and a small amount of acetic acid ( $\text{CH}_3\text{COOH}$ ) are produced (Fig. 1d). These results imply that the methyl groups in  $\text{CH}_3\text{SH}$  are maintained for PCN-MT, while it is oxidized to  $\text{HCOOH}$ ,  $\text{CH}_3\text{COOH}$  and  $\text{H}_2\text{CO}_3$  for PCN-IT during the photocatalytic oxidation reaction. Variations of  $\text{CH}_3\text{SO}_3\text{H}$  and  $\text{H}_2\text{SO}_4$  during the photocatalytic oxidation of  $\text{CH}_3\text{SH}$  by PCNs are shown in Fig. 1e and f. The total sulfur contents by accounting for these two products are nearly identical to that of eliminated  $\text{CH}_3\text{SH}$ , on both photocatalysts and during the whole reaction process. For PCN-MT, the selectivity of  $\text{CH}_3\text{SO}_3\text{H}$  increases slightly at early stage of irradiation (0–60 min), and then becomes constant (84.3%) with further irradiation (Fig. 1e inset). In the previous reports, the oxidation of  $\text{CH}_3\text{SH}$  usually occurs in a sequential manner, that is,  $\text{CH}_3\text{SH}$  is first oxidized to  $\text{CH}_3\text{SO}_3\text{H}$  and further transformed to  $\text{H}_2\text{SO}_4$  [28–31]. This pathway makes it difficult for the reaction to stop at  $\text{CH}_3\text{SO}_3\text{H}$ , resulting in low selectivity of  $\text{CH}_3\text{SO}_3\text{H}$ . In this work, the observation that the gradual increase in the selectivity of  $\text{CH}_3\text{SO}_3\text{H}$  with irradiation time excludes that the sequential reaction is dominant in the oxidation of  $\text{CH}_3\text{SH}$  on PCN-MT. Instead, the formed  $\text{CH}_3\text{SO}_3\text{H}$  is difficult to further transform into  $\text{H}_2\text{SO}_4$  as evidenced by the results from Fig. S2 (details shown in the Supporting Information), thus achieving highly selective production of  $\text{CH}_3\text{SO}_3\text{H}$ . On PCN-IT, with  $\text{H}_2\text{SO}_4$  as dominant product, both the selectivity of  $\text{H}_2\text{SO}_4$  and  $\text{CH}_3\text{SO}_3\text{H}$  keeps constant over the irradiation time. To get more insight into the reaction process,  $\text{CH}_3\text{SH}$  gas was stopped at 15 min but keeping the irradiation to examine if  $\text{CH}_3\text{SO}_3\text{H}$  can be further oxidized to  $\text{H}_2\text{SO}_4$ . It is shown from Figure 1f that  $\text{H}_2\text{SO}_4$  is



**Fig. 1.** Photocatalytic performance of PCN-MT (a) and PCN-IT (b) for  $\text{CH}_3\text{SH}$  oxidation under different conditions. (c) Stability test of PCN-MT and PCN-IT. (d) Selectivity of photocatalytic  $\text{CH}_3\text{SH}$  oxidation over PCN-MT and PCN-IT (inset: ion chromatograms for samples of PCN-MT and PCN-IT). Time profiles of sulfur oxide products variation during  $\text{CH}_3\text{SH}$  photocatalytic oxidation over PCN-MT (e) and PCN-IT (f) (inset: sulfur oxides selectivity versus time).

not produced any longer after the stop of  $\text{CH}_3\text{SH}$ , and the amount of  $\text{CH}_3\text{SO}_3\text{H}$  is not decreased significantly neither, suggesting that  $\text{CH}_3\text{SO}_3\text{H}$  is not the intermediate in  $\text{CH}_3\text{SH}$  to  $\text{H}_2\text{SO}_4$  conversion catalyzed by PCN-IT. Moreover, when  $\text{CH}_3\text{SO}_3\text{H}$  (1.0  $\mu\text{mol}$ ) is used as a reactant, negligible  $\text{H}_2\text{SO}_4$  is produced (Fig. S3), further substantiating that  $\text{H}_2\text{SO}_4$  is not produced by oxidation of  $\text{CH}_3\text{SO}_3\text{H}$ . These results indicate that  $\text{CH}_3\text{SH}$  can be directly converted to  $\text{H}_2\text{SO}_4$ , bypassing the  $\text{CH}_3\text{SO}_3\text{H}$  intermediates on PCN-IT. In other words, the  $\text{H}_2\text{SO}_4$  and  $\text{CH}_3\text{SO}_3\text{H}$  during the oxidation of  $\text{CH}_3\text{SH}$  is directly formed on PCN-IT and PCN-MT through two different pathways, respectively.  $\text{H}_2\text{SO}_4$  selectivity in PCN-IT comes from the oxidation of methyl group in  $\text{CH}_3\text{SH}$ , while the reaction on PCN-MT proceeds via oxidation of S-H bond within  $\text{CH}_3\text{SH}$  to yield  $\text{CH}_3\text{SO}_3\text{H}$ .

The identification of the existence of two different oxidation pathways for oxidation of  $\text{CH}_3\text{SH}$  on the PCN-based photocatalyst has important implications. It suggests that product selectivity can be achieved by modulating the occurrence of these two pathways. For this purpose, an understanding of the mechanism of these two pathways is essential. To uncover the underlying reasons for the different behaviors of the two catalysts for photocatalytic  $\text{CH}_3\text{SH}$  aerobic oxidation, we compared the structures of the PCN-MT and PCN-IT samples. Typically, thermal polymerization of melamine yields a one-dimensional (1D) polymer of melon structure [45], whereas ionothermal calcination of melon yields the two-dimensional (2D) poly(heptazine imide) structure [46], which are indicative of the difference in dimensionality between PCN-MT (1D) and PCN-IT (2D). The XRD pattern of PCN-MT (Fig. 2a) shows characteristic peaks at  $12.8^\circ$  and  $27.5^\circ$ , representing in-plane

repeating packing of heptazine units (100) and inter-planar stacking of aromatic segments (002), respectively. With respect to PCN-IT, an obvious shift of the (100) diffraction peak to lower degree ( $7.8^\circ$ ) could be ascribed to the breakage in the arrangement of in-plane repeating heptazine units in the 2D layer caused by the insertion of  $\text{K}^+$  into the heptazine unit [47,48]. In contrast, the (002) peak of PCN-IT shifts from  $27.5^\circ$  to  $28.2^\circ$  as compared to PCN-MT samples, reflecting a shortened stacking distance of interlayer, and the significantly narrower (002) diffraction peak is indicative of the higher crystallinity in PCN-IT.

Fourier transform infrared (FT-IR) spectroscopies (Fig. 2b) show that both samples exhibit similar characteristic peaks at 810, 1200–1700 and 3000–3500  $\text{cm}^{-1}$ , which can be attributed to the out-of-plane bending vibration of heptazine units, stretching and bending vibration of aromatic CN heterocycles, N-H stretching vibration, respectively [49]. Notably, a new peak at 2178  $\text{cm}^{-1}$  appears in PCN-IT, attributed to the cyanamide groups, while this peak is not observable in the PCN-MT sample. On the other hand, the intensity of PCN-MT centered at about 3270  $\text{cm}^{-1}$ , which is ascribed to the amino groups, is more significant than that of PCN-IT, implying a relatively higher amount of  $-\text{NH}_2$  in PCN-MT. C 1s and N 1s XPS spectra were employed to gain further insights of the structural characteristics for these two catalysts. High resolution C 1s spectra of PCN-MT can be deconvoluted into two peaks located at 288.3 and 284.8 eV (Fig. 2c), corresponding to  $\text{N}-\text{C}=\text{N}$  and adventitious hydrocarbon from surroundings, respectively. Note that the C 1s spectrum of PCN-IT display a new peak centered at 286.2 eV, which was reported to be associated with cyanamide-type defects [50], further verifying the existence of  $-\text{C}\equiv\text{N}$  in PCN-IT. For N 1s spectra

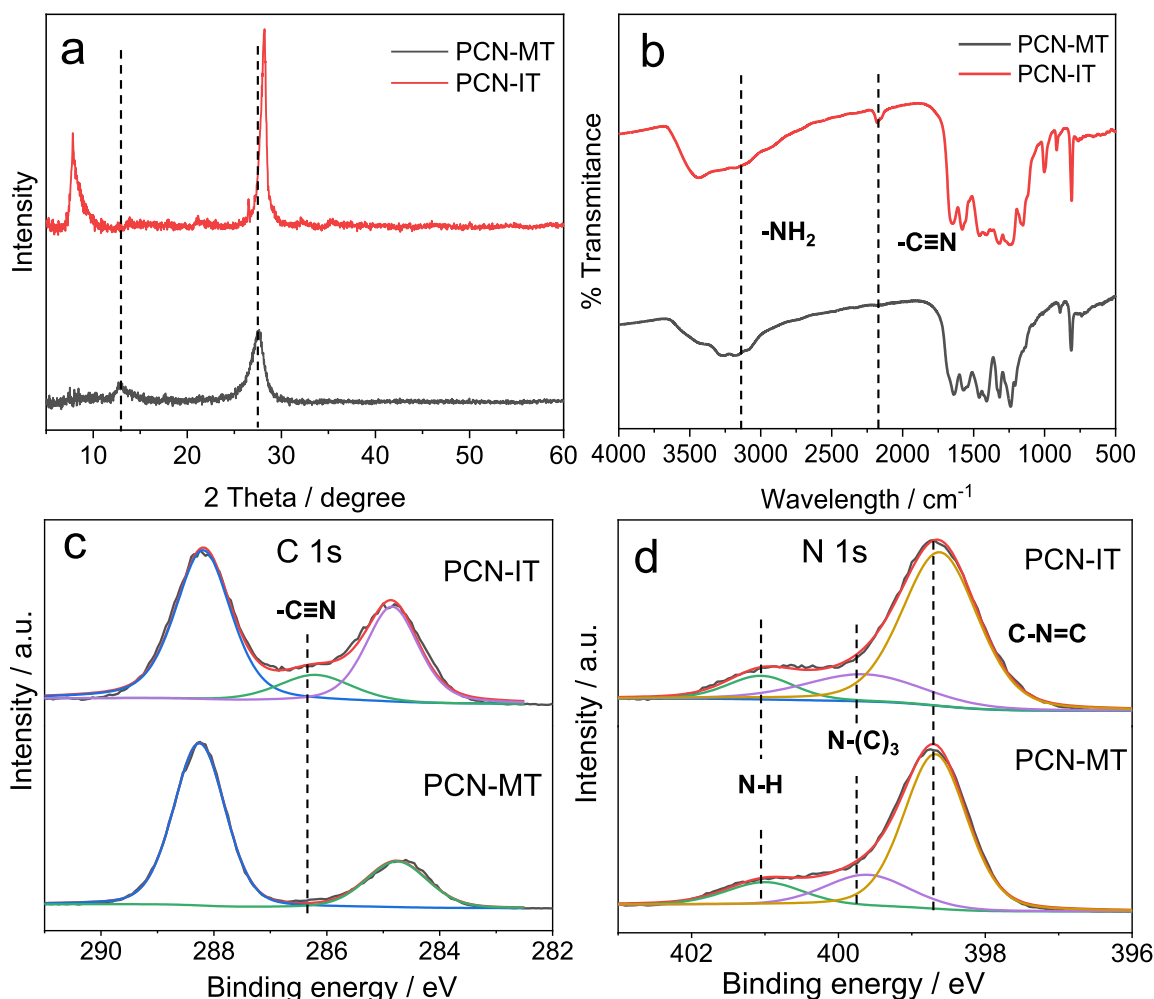


Fig. 2. (a) XRD pattern, (b) FTIR spectra, High resolution of C 1s spectra (c) and N1s (d) spectra of PCN-MT and PCN-IT.



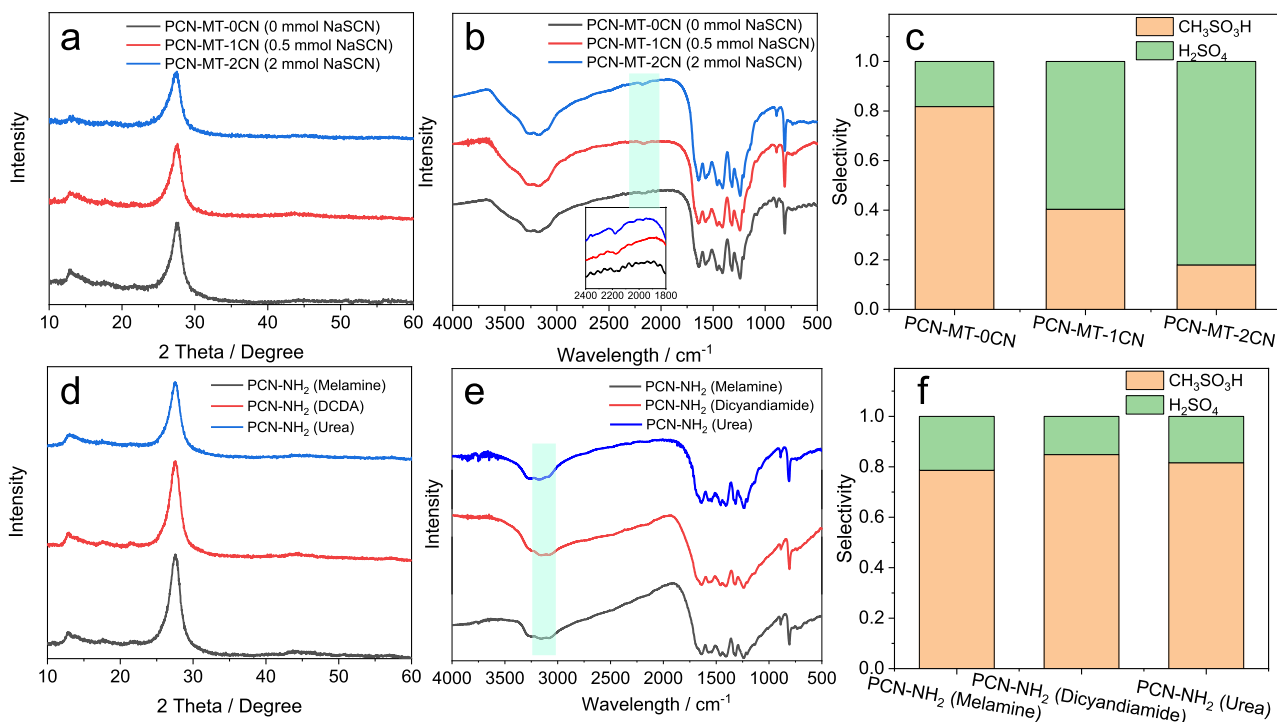
(Fig. 2d), the binding energy peaks at 401.0, 399.6 and 398.7 eV observed for both catalysts are characteristic of amino N (N-H), tertiary N (N-(C)<sub>3</sub>) and bi-coordinated N (C-N = C), respectively. The peak area ratios between N-H and N-(C)<sub>3</sub> for PCN-MT and PCN-IT are 0.67 and 0.50, respectively. The distinctly lower value in PCN-IT could be ascribed to the deprotonation of -C-NH<sub>2</sub> in PCN-MT generating cyanamide groups [50]. The above results clearly demonstrate that, besides crystallinity, the two catalysts also possess different edge functional groups. The cyanamide groups on PCN-IT are the major functionals, whereas amino groups are enriched at edge of PCN-MT.

Based on the above results, dimensionality, crystallinity or functional groups in PCN may account for the different products selectivity. To identify the origin of the selectivity differences of PCN on the photocatalytic oxidation of CH<sub>3</sub>SH, the edge amino group in PCN-MT was substituted with cyanamide groups by using NaSCN as cyanation reagent, while keeping the 1D polymer backbone (dimensionality) and crystallinity of the catalyst unchanged (Fig. 3a). The successful grafting of cyanamide groups in PCN-MT-2CN was evidenced by the FTIR band (Fig. 3b) at 2178 cm<sup>-1</sup>, corresponding to C≡N stretching vibrations of cyanamide groups [51], the C1s XPS peak (Fig. S4) at energy of 286.2 eV associated with -C≡N [50], and the <sup>13</sup>C NMR signal (Fig. S4) centered around 120.4 ppm, which is in accord with previous literature values for potassium melonate [52] and cyanamide-decorated PCN [49,53]. In addition, the cyanamide group content could be readily regulated by varying the NaSCN concentration. When PCN-MT was treated in pure CH<sub>3</sub>CN without NaSCN, few cyanamide groups were observed, and the selectivity of H<sub>2</sub>SO<sub>4</sub> remains very low, as in the case of original PCN-MT. The treatment of PCN-MT with increased concentration of NaSCN lead to a gradual increase in the contents of cyanamide group. Notably, the H<sub>2</sub>SO<sub>4</sub> selectivity augments sharply from 18.2% to 82.0%. These results demonstrate that the cyanamide groups are essential to the formation of H<sub>2</sub>SO<sub>4</sub>, and that the dimensionality and crystallinity of PCN may present a minor contribution to selectivity. On the other end, to investigate the effects of amino groups on products selectivity, a series of PCN photocatalysts with amino groups were also prepared by different precursors. As shown in Fig. 3d and e, FTIR and XRD spectra confirm the successful

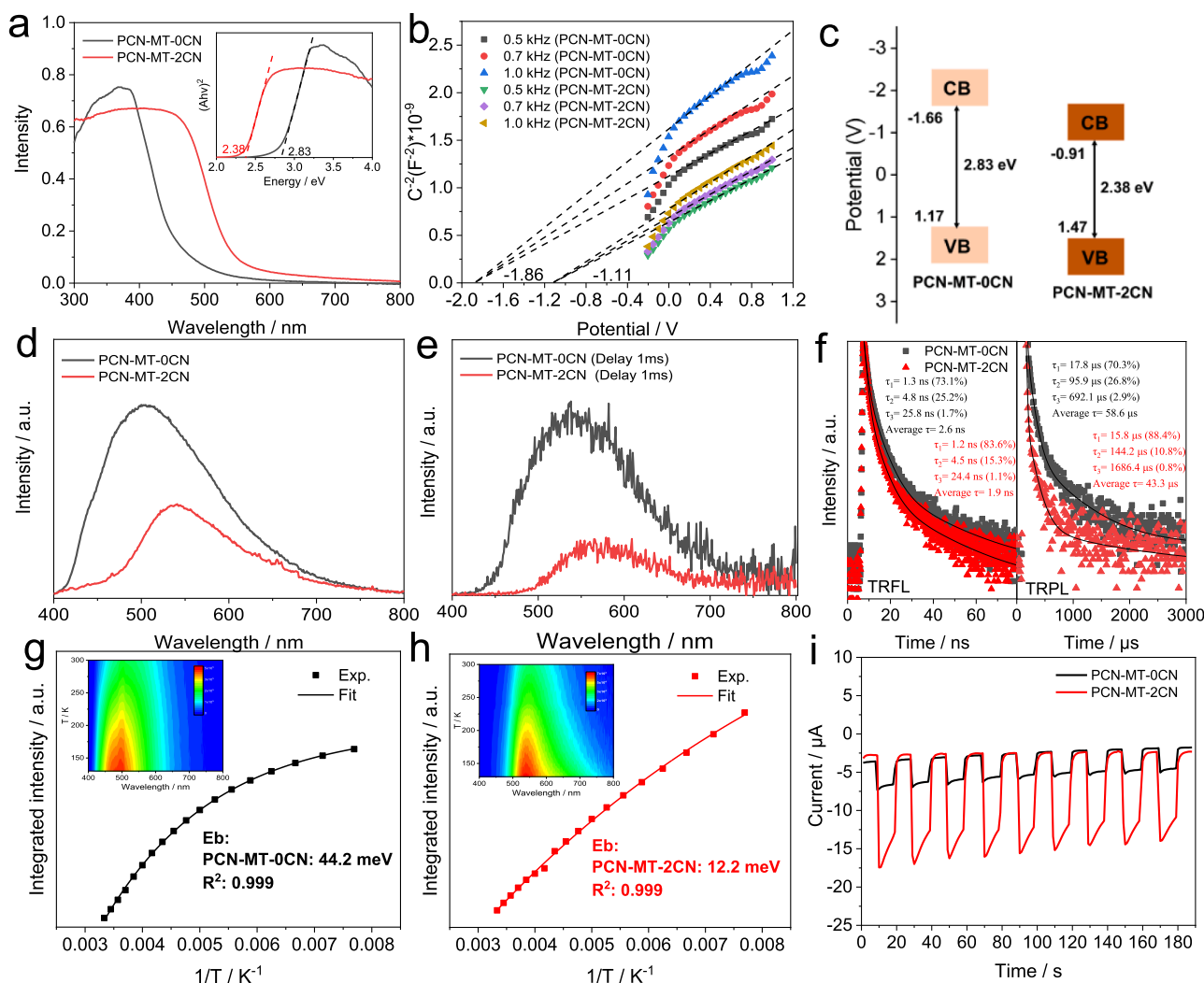
synthesis of the amino rich groups modified PCN photocatalysts with similar crystallinity. It is noteworthy that the selectivity of CH<sub>3</sub>SH to CH<sub>3</sub>SO<sub>3</sub>H for the three catalysts reaches over 78% (Fig. 3f), confirming that edge functional groups make a big difference to the selectivity of CH<sub>3</sub>SH oxidation.

To explore the intrinsic reasons for the influence of edge dangling functional units on the selectivity of photocatalytic CH<sub>3</sub>SH oxidation, we systematically compared photochemical behaviors of amino- and cyanamide-enriched PCN photocatalysts (PCN-MT-0CN and PCN-MT-2CN), which exhibit very significant differences in product selectivity and functional groups, but possess similar polymer backbone and crystallinity (Fig. 3a and b). Fig. 4a displays the UV-vis diffuse reflectance spectra (DRS) of PCN-MT-0CN and PCN-MT-2CN. The PCN-MT-2CN shows an obvious red-shift with absorption edge extending to ca. 600 nm. The band gap of PCN-MT-0CN and PCN-MT-2CN from the Tauc plots is calculated to be 2.83 and 2.38 eV, respectively. Fig. 4b displays the Mott-Schottky (M-S) plots within frequencies ranging from 0.5 to 1.0 kHz for both samples. The flat band potential determined from the M-S plots for PCN-MT-0CN and PCN-MT-2CN is -1.66 and -0.91 V (vs. NHE), respectively. The valence band (VB) potentials of PCN-MT-0CN and PCN-MT-2CN are accordingly determined to be 1.17 and 1.47 V, respectively. The band structures of the two as-prepared samples are illustrated in Fig. 4c. It can be seen that the introduction of electron-withdrawing terminal -C≡N groups in PCN results in the apparently narrowed band gap, making it adsorb more visible light with lower energy. The downwards shift of the VB position for cyanamide-decorated PCN leads to the stronger oxidizing ability of photo-generated valence band holes.

Photoluminescence spectroscopies including steady-state and time-resolved fluorescence (FL) and phosphorescence (PH) were further investigated to shed light on the charge recombination and separation processes in PCN-MT-0CN and PCN-MT-2CN. As shown in Fig. 4d, FL spectra recorded at ambient temperature exhibits a strong emission peak centered at 506 nm for PCN-MT-0CN, while the emission of PCN-MT-2CN is relatively weak and centered around 538 nm, assigning to radiative decay of singlet excitons. The notable red shift of 32 nm for PCN-



**Fig. 3.** (a) XRD patterns, (b) FTIR spectra, and (c) selectivity of CH<sub>3</sub>SH photocatalytic oxidation over PCN-CN samples, (d) XRD patterns, (e) FTIR spectra, and (f) selectivity of CH<sub>3</sub>SH photocatalytic oxidation over as-synthesized PCN-NH<sub>2</sub> samples.



**Fig. 4.** (a) DRS (inset: Tauc plots), (b) M-S plots and (c) Schematic energetic diagram of PCN-MT-0CN and PCN-MT-2CN. (d) Steady-state FL spectra, (e) PH spectra with delay time of 1 ms, (f) Time-resolved fluorescence (TRFL) and phosphorescence (TRPL) spectra of PCN-MT-0CN and PCN-MT-2CN. Evolution of PL emission intensity as a function of temperature from 130 to 300 K for PCN-MT-0CN (g) and PCN-MT-2CN (h) (inset: Contour plots of the temperature-dependent PL emission spectra). (i) Transient photocurrent response at  $-0.25$  V vs Ag/AgCl.

MT-2CN may arise from its smaller bandgap, which is in good agreement with the DRS results (Fig. 4a). In addition, time-resolved fluorescence (TRFL) measurement was conducted under excitation at 375 nm. As shown in Fig. 4f, the decay profiles can be fitted using treble-exponential decay functions where the shortest lifespan component ( $\tau_1$ ) denotes the electron transfer process between energy levels, the longer ( $\tau_2$ ) and longest one ( $\tau_3$ ) correspond to the nonradiative and radiative recombination, respectively [54]. The treble-exponential fitting for PCN-MT-0CN and PCN-MT-2CN yielded an average lifetime of around 2.6 ns and 1.9 ns, respectively. The weaker FL intensity and shorter lifetime of PCN-MT-2CN suggest the enhanced singlet exciton dissociation and charge transfer in PCN-MT-2CN system. Unlike FL, PH is stemmed from the radiative decay from the triplet excited state to the ground state. As shown in Fig. 4e, the intensity of phosphorescent emission for PCN-MT-0CN sample is stronger than the PCN-MT-2CN one, indicative of a considerably increased population of triplet exciton in the amino-enriched sample. The energy difference between the singlet and triplet states ( $\Delta E_{ST}$ ) obtained by measuring the energy separations between the FL and PH peaks were estimated to evaluate the intersystem crossing (ISC) efficiency [10]. Fig. S5 shows that PCN-MT-0CN with amino defects (0.149 eV) exhibits a slightly smaller  $\Delta E_{ST}$  with respect to the PCN-MT-2CN counterpart (0.156 eV). The

reduced ISC barrier for PCN-MT-0CN hence dramatically promotes the transformation of singlet exciton into triplet form, resulting in efficient triplet excitons generation. Further, time-resolved phosphorescence spectra (Fig. 4f) of both catalysts exhibit typical multi-stage decay profiles, which was previously reported to be associated with triplet-triplet annihilation, exciton diffusion, or Förster resonance energy transfer [55,56]. Along with triplet concentration decreasing, the decays ultimately turned to monomolecular exponential. The average PH lifetime of PCN-MT-2CN (43.3  $\mu$ s) is shorter than PCN-MT-0CN (58.6  $\mu$ s), probably resulting from the rapid dissociation of triplet exciton of cyanamide-enriched PCN.

To gain deeper insight into the excitonic process in these two PCN photocatalysts, the exciton binding energy (Eb) were evaluated using temperature-dependent FL spectroscopic measurements. As displayed in the inset of Fig. 4g and h, the FL intensity decreases with the increasing of temperature, which offers the driving force for the singlet exciton dissociation. The corresponding exciton binding energy can be derived by fitting the temperature dependent FL intensity according to the Arrhenius equation [57,58],

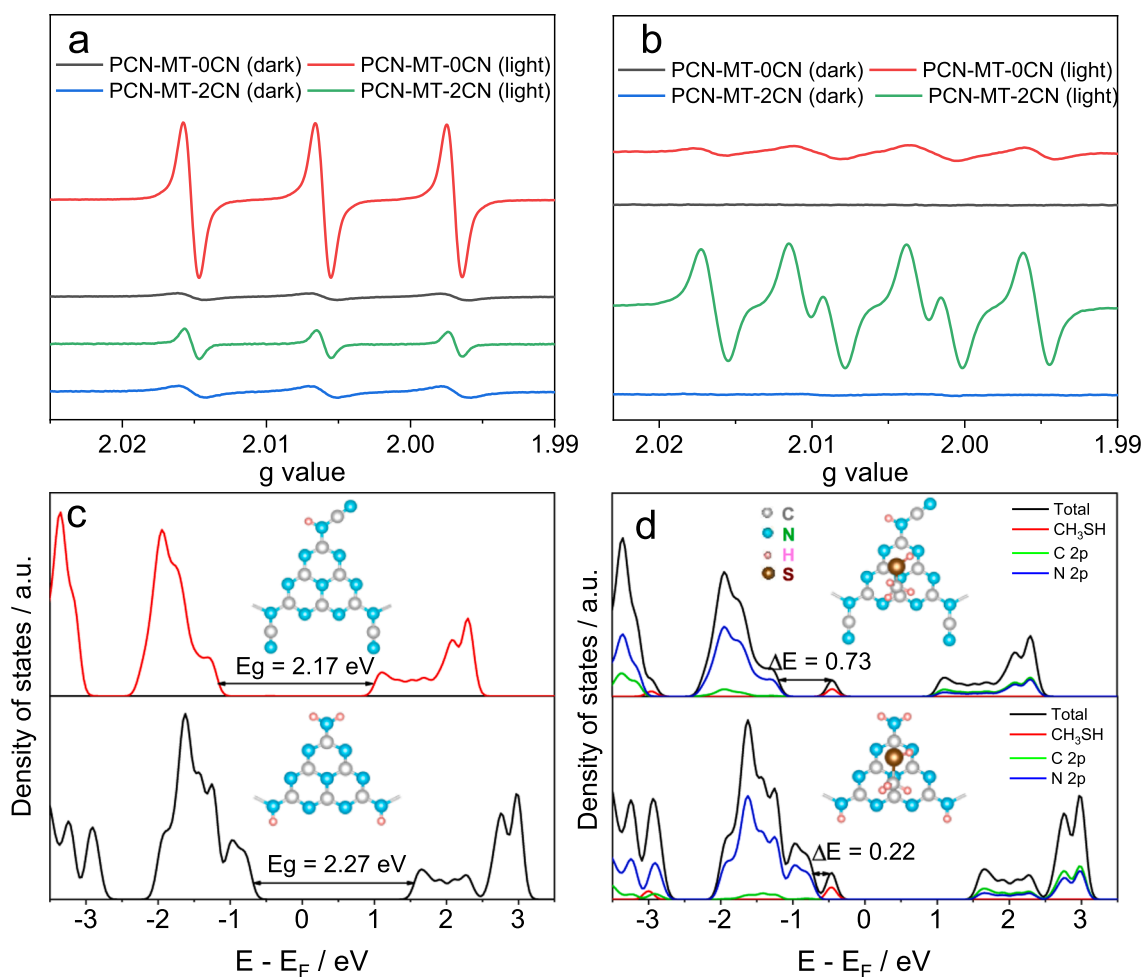
$$I(T) = I_0 / \left[ 1 + A_{\text{exp}} \left( \frac{-E_b}{k_B T} \right) \right]$$

The Eb of PCN-MT-2CN (12.2 mV) is much lower than that of the PCN-MT-0CN case (44.2 mV) (Fig. 4g and h). These results demonstrate that excitonic effects of PCN-MT-0CN are robust, thus resulting in high exciton concentration, whereas the excitons are more easily dissociated into free carriers after introduction of cyanamide units in PCN. The behavior of charge carriers in PCN-MT-0CN and PCN-MT-2CN was then evaluated by photocurrent and electrochemical impedance tests. As shown by Fig. 4i and S6, PCN-MT-2CN exhibits remarkably higher photocurrent response and lower charge-transfer resistance. This confirms that accelerated exciton dissociation in PCN-MT-2CN increases the photogeneration of free charge carriers, giving higher charge migration rate for PCN-MT-2CN. In sharp contrast, the strong excitonic effect of PCN-MT-0CN restricts the number of photogenerated electrons, resulting in weaker photocurrent intensity and larger charge transfer resistance.

Since  $O_2$  is involved in the photocatalytic oxidation reaction of  $CH_3SH$ , the formation of reactive oxygen species (ROS) by oxygen activation should greatly affect the photocatalytic selectivity. As the most convincing evidence for the identification of ROS, electron spin resonance (ESR) measurements were carried out to distinguish different photocatalytic active species generated over PCN-MT-0CN and PCN-MT-2CN. As shown in Fig. 5a, we observe the strong and typical 1:1:1 triplet signal of 2,2,6,6-tetramethylpiperidine-N-oxyl (TEMPO) for PCN-MT-0CN when 2,2,6,6-tetramethylpiperidine (TEMP) was used as the  $^1O_2$  probe. The dramatic difference in the intensity of TEMPO signals between the PCN-MT-0CN and PCN-MT-2CN samples clearly reveals the enhanced  $^1O_2$  generation with PCN-MT-0CN. In contrast, by using 5,5-

Dimethyl-1-pyrroline-N-oxide (DMPO) as the trapping agent, the strong sextet ESR signal, which is attributed to the adducts of DMPO and superoxide radical (DMPO- $OOH$ ), appears for PCN-MT-2CN sample, whereas very weak DMPO- $OOH$  is observed in the PCN-MT-0CN case. These results indicate that, the amino-enriched PCN tend to photo-activate  $O_2$  by an energy transfer pathway to generate  $^1O_2$  as the dominant ROS, while the PCN with cyanamide- group greatly favors the formation of  $\cdot O_2$  through an electron transfer process.

To further understand the influence of edge functional groups of PCN on its reactivity, we compared the electronic structures between the two catalysts by DFT calculations. As shown by the density of states (DOS) in Fig. 5c, the energy gap (Eg) between the bottom of conduction band (CB) and the top of valence band (VB) for amino- and cyanamide- grafted PCN are calculated to be 2.27 and 2.17 eV, respectively. Although the Eg values are underestimated somewhat, due to the intrinsic error of the generalized gradient approximation functional in DFT calculations, the Eg of amino-enriched PCN is significantly narrower than that of cyanamide-decorated PCN, which coincides with the UV-vis DRS results (Fig. 4a). An analysis on the DOS also demonstrates that the CB edges for both catalysts are mainly composed of C 2p and N 2p orbitals, while VB edges are dominated by N 2p orbitals (Fig. 5c, d). It is noteworthy that the energy difference ( $\Delta E$ ) between VB edge and the state of  $CH_3SH$  derived from S 3p orbitals are quite significant between the two catalysts. For cyanamide decorated PCN catalyst, the state of  $CH_3SH$  is located above the VB edge by  $\Delta E = 0.73$  eV, while the energy difference for amino-substituted PCN is only 0.22 eV. The larger  $\Delta E$  in cyanamide-PCN implies that the photogenerated holes have more driving force to



**Fig. 5.** ESR spectra of (a) TEMP- $^1O_2$  adducts and (b) DMPO- $O_2$  adducts over PCN-MT-0CN and PCN-MT-2CN. (c) Calculated band gap energy for amino- and cyanamide- grafted PCN. (d) Density of states for two PCN catalysts with  $CH_3SH$ .

oxide  $\text{CH}_3\text{SH}$ . By contrast, the small  $\Delta E$  for amino-PCN means that the hole transfer from the VB to  $\text{CH}_3\text{SH}$  is energetically difficult. Such an energetic profile between amino- and cyanamide-PCN is in line with the results from M-S plots. It is evident that the strong electron-withdrawing effect of cyanamide groups makes the VB of cyanamide-PCN possess high oxidation ability, while the substitution of electron-donating amino groups decreases the oxidability.

Based on the aforementioned experimental results, the plausible mechanisms of photocatalytic oxygen of  $\text{CH}_3\text{SH}$  over two PCN are proposed as follows (Fig. 6). For amino moiety enriched PCN, the large exciton binding energy of PCN with  $\text{NH}_2$  groups (Fig. 4g), giving rise to strong excitonic effect, restricts the dissociation of excitons. And the small  $\Delta E_{\text{ST}}$  (the energy difference between the singlet and triplet states, Fig. S5) in  $\text{NH}_2$ -enriched PCN promotes singlet to triplet exciton transformation, resulting in high population of triplet excitons (Fig. 4e). During the annihilation process of triplets, the energy released could be transferred to the ground state molecular oxygen to generate  $^1\text{O}_2$  through resonant energy transfer process. On the other hand, due to the small  $\Delta E$  between VB edge and the state of  $\text{CH}_3\text{SH}$  (Fig. 5c), charge separation is disfavored so that oxidation of  $\text{CH}_3\text{SH}$  via electron transfer process is difficult to occur.  $^1\text{O}_2$  possesses high electrophilicity and shows a considerable reactivity toward electron-rich sites [59–61]. The target molecular  $\text{CH}_3\text{SH}$  contains an electronegative sulfur atom (as compared to carbon), which is sensitive to the electrophilic attack of  $^1\text{O}_2$ . Thus, singlet-oxygen-driven photocatalytic oxidation of  $\text{CH}_3\text{SH}$  to  $\text{CH}_3\text{SO}_3\text{H}$  is dominant in the amino-decorated PCN system. Previously, due to the uncontrollable ROS production, the catalysts generally have a lack of site-selectivity for  $\text{CH}_3\text{SH}$  oxidation, making it difficult for the reaction to stop at  $\text{CH}_3\text{SO}_3\text{H}$  and leading to low selectivity for  $\text{CH}_3\text{SO}_3\text{H}$ . In this work, by virtue of the nonradical nature of  $^1\text{O}_2$ , high selective production of  $\text{CH}_3\text{SO}_3\text{H}$  is achieved through electrophilic addition of  $^1\text{O}_2$  to S site within  $\text{CH}_3\text{SH}$ . On the contrary, in the case of cyanated PCN catalyst, the low exciton binding energy (Fig. 4h) results in a high carrier separation efficiency, which limits the  $^1\text{O}_2$  generation. By contrast, the large  $\Delta E$  between VB edge and the state of  $\text{CH}_3\text{SH}$  (Fig. 5d) entail the photogenerated holes possessing strong oxidizing capability to oxidize  $\text{CH}_3\text{SH}$  to  $\text{CH}_3\text{S}^\cdot$ . The high reactivity of  $\text{CH}_3\text{S}^\cdot$  renders readily dimerization to form DMDS, which is detected via PTR-TOF-MS (Fig. S7b). Further, the addition of 2,2,6,6-Tetramethylpiperidinoxy (TEMPO), an effective scavenger for thiyl radicals [62,63], into the reaction system, led to a significantly decreased production of DMDS (Fig. S7c), demonstrating that  $\text{CH}_3\text{S}^\cdot$  radical is indeed formed in PCN-MT-2CN system. For amino-enriched PCN, little DMDS is observed during the photocatalytic  $\text{CH}_3\text{SH}$  oxidation (Fig. S7a), suggesting little  $\text{CH}_3\text{S}^\cdot$  is

generated for  $\text{NH}_2$ -decorated PCN due to the preferential reaction of molecular oxygen with the dominant triplet excitons in  $\text{NH}_2$ -decorated PCN forming  $^1\text{O}_2$ . On the other side, the photogenerated electrons are capable of reduce molecular oxygen via electron transfer pathway to produce  $\cdot\text{O}_2^-$  species, which subsequently break the  $-\text{CH}_3$  end of  $\text{CH}_3\text{S}^\cdot$  through hydrogen extraction to produce carbon containing compounds and  $\text{H}_2\text{SO}_4$ . The formation of  $\text{CH}_3\text{S}^\cdot$  and  $\cdot\text{O}_2^-$  species indicates that oxidation of  $\text{CH}_3\text{SH}$  on NCN-enriched PCN is a radical-based reaction.

#### 4. Conclusions

In conclusion, excellent tunable site-selectivity of photocatalytic  $\text{CH}_3\text{SH}$  degradation was successfully achieved by regulating edge functional groups of PCN. Due to its strong excitonic effects, the PCN with high density of amino defects prefers to generate  $^1\text{O}_2$ , which favors electrophilic attacking the  $-\text{SH}$  group of  $\text{CH}_3\text{SH}$  and leads to formation of  $\text{CH}_3\text{SO}_3\text{H}$ . By contrast, due to the low exciton binding energy, cyanation of the amino groups can effectively boost the photogenerated charge separation to produce free holes and electrons. High oxidability of holes enable the activation of  $\text{CH}_3\text{SH}$  to  $\text{CH}_3\text{S}^\cdot$ , while the free electrons are capable of reducing molecular  $\text{O}_2$  to  $\cdot\text{O}_2^-$ , which prefers to directly damage  $-\text{CH}_3$  end of  $\text{CH}_3\text{SH}$  and produce  $\text{H}_2\text{SO}_4$  and carbon containing compounds. Exploring the role of functional groups in photocatalytic reaction process offer new insight into the structure-selectivity relationship and open a novel avenue for advanced photocatalysts design.

#### CRedit authorship contribution statement

**Shasha Li:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Data curation, Visualization, Funding acquisition, Writing – original draft. **Yufan Zhang:** Methodology, Data curation, Writing – review & editing. **Youji Li:** Conceptualization, Writing – review & editing. **Jing Xue:** Methodology, Data curation, Writing – review & editing. **Chaoyuan Deng:** Data curation, Visualization. **Wenjing Song:** Conceptualization, Supervision, Writing – review & editing. **Chuncheng Chen:** Conceptualization, Supervision, Funding acquisition, Writing – review & editing. **Jincai Zhao:** Supervision, Funding acquisition, Writing – review & editing.

#### Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

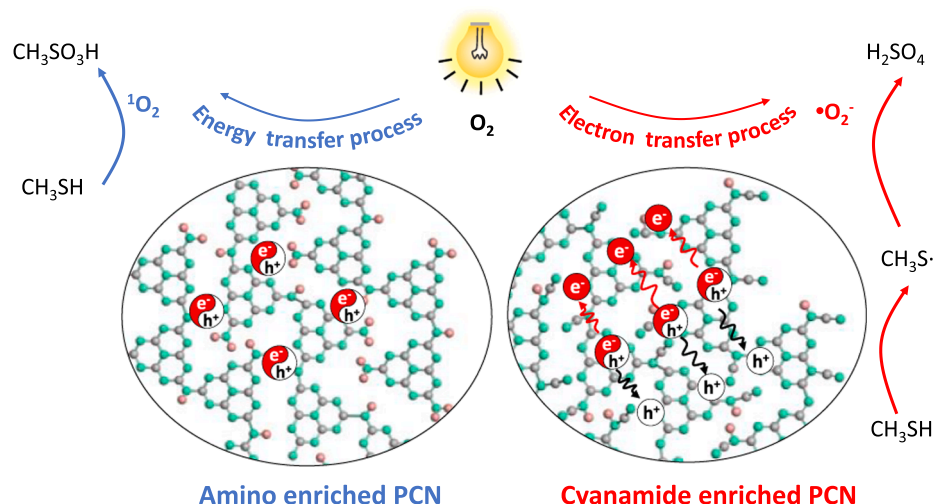


Fig. 6. The mechanism of selective photocatalytic oxidation of  $\text{CH}_3\text{SH}$  induced by tunable molecular oxygen activation.



## Data Availability

Data will be made available on request.

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## Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data includes the catalytic stability characterizations, structural and photoelectrochemical characterizations of PCN, active species verification.

## Appendix A. Supporting information

Supplementary data associated with this article can be found in the online version at [doi:10.1016/j.apcatb.2023.123180](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.apcatb.2023.123180).

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